DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 202 054 CS 503 356

AUTHOR Stringer, Bobbi Rhe; Hurt, H. Thomas
TITLE To Praise or Not to Praise: Factors to Consider before Utilizing Praise as a Reinforcing Device in the Classroom Communication Process.
PUB DATE Apr 81
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southern Speech Communication Association (Austin, TX, April 8-10, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; *Classroom Communication; *Classroom Research; Elementary Education; Feedback; Literature Reviews; *Positive Reinforcement; Student Attitudes; *Student Motivation; Student Teacher Relationship; *Teacher Influence
IDENTIFIERS *Praise

ABSTRACT

For praise to have a positive effect on a child's achievement, teachers must be aware of some important research findings. Varying results of early studies on the benefits of praise still indicate one generalization: either praise or criticism is more effective in reinforcing student achievement than is ignoring achievement. Research in the past two decades has indicated more consistently that positive verbal reinforcement leads to improved achievement. Some educators, however, still hold that praise can be a threat for a child rather than a reward. For example, praise that does not fit a child's self-image can trigger a negative goal-setting process. Praise results in improved achievement only when it is congruent with student needs. Researchers are examining the relationship between praise and behavior, with studies indicating that praise reinforces appropriate classroom behavior and inappropriate behavior can best be controlled by ignoring it rather than punishing it. A study of motivation and praise suggests that students are intrinsically motivated when they engage in behavior because the behavior itself is rewarding. Adding extrinsic reinforcement to an already interesting task does not increase motivation but may instead cause a student to lose interest. However, praise may not be detrimental to intrinsic motivation if it is used to invite a response from the child. (HTH)

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To Praise or Not to Praise: Factors To Consider Before Utilizing Praise As a Reinforcing Device In the Classroom Communication Process

by

Bobbi Rhe Stringer
Keller (Texas) Middle School

and

H. Thomas Hurt
North Texas State University

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H. Thomas Hurt

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Speech Communication Association, Austin, Texas, April 8-10, 1981.

CS503356

To Praise or Not to Praise:
Factors To Consider Before Utilizing Praise
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In the Classroom Communication Process

Teachers have both the challenge and the responsibility to attempt to discover what makes the student desire, or not desire, to seek knowledge, to develop better social relationships, to use his/her abilities, and to cultivate his/her potential. In short, the teacher must attempt to be sensitive to what motivates the student. The communication transaction of verbal praise is an interpersonal experience and plays an important role in the reinforcement process, which in turn affects the learning and behavioral activity of the student.

Since praise is generally thought of as being a "good" reward for reinforcing achievement and acceptable behavior, it is a topic which would not appear to be a debatable issue. A closer look, however, reveals that for praise to have a positive effect on a child, a teacher must be aware of some important findings by authorities. The purpose of this paper is to review the literature related to verbal praise and achievement, to discuss some of the possible reasons for the inconsistent and controversial research findings, to discuss the effects of praise on achievement and on behavior, to explain the "extrinsic rewards vs. intrinsic motivation" concept as it relates to praise, and finally, to comment on possible implications of this research for the classroom teacher.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE
1916-1960

As early as 1916 Terman (1916) in discussing the administration of a standardized test, encouraged teachers to praise their students frequently and generously and to ignore any errors. He explained that praising the child contributed more than anything else to satisfactory rapport. Although the research findings since Terman's book was written have vascillated from one side of the fence to the other as to the effectiveness of praise, it is interesting to note that generally speaking research has borne out the truth of Terman's teaching and has shown that verbal praise does have a facillitating effect on the performance of school children.

Early History

E.B. Hurlock was one of the historically prominent early researchers in the effects of praise as a communication transaction in the classroom. Her 1924 study (Hurlock, 1925) found praise and reproof after one application to be of equal value in motivating students to achieve. In an attempt to discover the effect of praise over a longer period of time, she undertook the second study which revealed that a greater amount of average improvement occurred in the praise group, followed by the reproof group, and last, the ignored group.

According to a review of the literature by Kennedy and Willcutt (1964) the 30's and 40's saw research fluctuating from

studies who found praise not to be as effective as supposed (e.g. Warden & Cohen, 1931; Benton, 1936), to studies which showed praise to be more effective than criticism (e.g. Davis & Ballard, 1932), to studies which showed criticism to be more effective than praise (e.g. Anderson & Smith, 1932). Personality differences for the most part were not taken into consideration during this period. Two notable exceptions (Forlano & Axelrod, 1937, and Thompson & Hunnicut, 1944) dealt with praise as it relates to introverts and extroverts. In Forlano and Axelrod's brief experiment, praise did not make a differentiating effect until the last of the three trials. Praise and blame were both shown to be more effective than no attention at all. Thompson and Hunnicut's study included six tests in an attempt to discover the effects of repeated praise and blame. They found that if repeated often, praise increased the output of the introverts until it was significantly higher than introverts blamed or extroverts praised.

The 50's doubled the number of studies carried out and began to introduce variations into research methods. One interesting study (Page, 1958) concluded that the time and effort of writing encouraging comments on students' papers apparently pays off. Results of the Page study reveal that the comments had a measureable and significant effect on improved learning. Controversy reigned, but one common generalization emerged:

G1: Some form of attention, either praise or criticism is more effective in reinforcing student achievement than is ignoring achievement.

Possible Explanations for Inconsistencies

One conceivable reason for the inconsistencies in research findings is the fact that with the exception of the two significant studies on introverts/extroverts mentioned above, very little attention was given to personality traits of the students involved in the studies. A second possible explanation relates to the differences in the type of tests involved and in the task complexity of the tests. One study (Scott et al., 1977) suggests that test anxiety may have contributed to the inconsistent results: "Finally, the results of this study suggest the achievement effects reported in previous research may have been mediated by test anxiety." (p. 553) Kennedy and Willcutt (1965) conclude that the verbal rewards were given regardless of performance by the children, incongruent with achievement, which probably affected the consistency of results.

A final answer to the question of inconsistency has been proposed by Locke (1968). According to him the contradictory results may be attributed to the failure of the investigations to control for differential goal-setting by the subjects. Locke reasons that the goals and intentions of the student sometime interfere with the expected results of the verbal communication from the teacher. Depending upon the student's frame of reference s/he may respond negatively to the teacher's praise. His/her goal response could possible be to work even harder, but it could also be to sulk, to get even by quitting, or to get overconfident and quit. The

student's perception of whether the praise was a negative or positive experience affects his/her goal response.

TO PRAISE ACHIEVEMENT...

For the past two decades the pendulum of research has turned more consistently toward the direction of praise haveing a positive effect on achievement. Hurlock's 1925 study has been confirmed by research utilizing math tests (Johannesson, 1967), subtests selected from WISC (Witner, Bornstein, & Dunham, 1971), and an achievement test covering content material (Anderson, White, & Wash, 1966). In several studies low achievers have been shown to learn more successfully after receiving praise (Johannesson, 1067; Kennedy & Willcutt, 1965; Saigh & Payne, 1979; Anderson, White, & Wash, 1966). Research by Van De Riet (1964) obtained an actual reduction in performance for praised achievers, but the Anderson, White, & Wash study, which was an extension of Van De Riet's research, found no reduction in performance for praised underachievers. Other variables which show a positive correlation between achievement and praise were considered in cross cultural research (Garza & Lipton, 1978) and the emotionally handicapped (Kandil, 1980). All of these studies point to the following generalization:

G2: Positive verbal reinforcement generally leads to improved achievement.

...OR NOT TO PRAISE ACHIEVEMENT

Although recent research points to the validity of verbal

reinforcement as a learning facilitator, some educators hold strong opinions against the usage of praise. Farson (1968) states that it is questionable as a motivator since verbal praise is an evaluation, and judgment of any kind causes people to feel uncomfortable. Farson labels praise as "a piece of psychological candy" (p. 112) and contends that rather than being a reward, praise is in fact a threat, because of the user's intent to motivate, move, or change the recipient.

Van De Riet (1966) concluded that praise was a threatening factor for the mentally retarded boys in her study. She contends that the reason the boys showed less improvement after receiving verbal praise was that they had a "need to fail," a concept explained by Kunst (1959) as being an active, though unconscious resistance to learning. Van Riet explains the following:

> If a need to fail is present in children with learning disabilities, then it would be expected that praise of their performance would be experienced as threatening and would act as a detriment to learning. (p. 139)

Other arguments against using praise for improving achievement are put forth by Rowe (1974). She made three observations as a result of research in using overt verbal reinforcement in the science classroom. She first noticed that praise inhibited the verbal performance of her students, lowered the number of alternative explanations offered by her students, and apparently undermined their confidence in their answers. Praise also

fostered competition and therefore cut down on cooperation and exchange of ideas among the students. And, finally, verbal praise cut into the students' task persistence.

Other studies (e.g. Hamacheck, 1968; Kennedy & Willcutt, 1965; Lawler, 1970; Van De Riet, 1964; Locke, 1968) caution against incongruent verbal praise and point out the possible detrimental effects on the student's motivation, particularly in problem solving, according to Lawler (1970). Gordon (1974) believes that praise which is inconsistent with and not appropriate for the student's actual performance can provoke "an even stronger defense of his existing low evaluation of himself." (p. 54) Praise that does not fit a student's self-image can trigger the negative goal-setting process discussed earlier in this paper.

Two generalizations can be stated relative to the arguments against using praise to reinforce achievement:

G3: Praise can result in improved achievement, but only when it is congruent with student needs.

G4: Incongruent praise can inhibit student motivation.

TO PRAISE BEHAVIOR...

With the introduction of behavior modification into the classroom, researchers began to examine the communication procedure of verbal reinforcement as it related to behavior, as well as achievement. Extensive research (e.g. Becker, et al., 1967; Thomas, Becker, & Armstrong, 1968; Hall, et al., 1968;

O'Leary, Becker, & Wesley, 1969; Madsen et al., 1968) has been carried out which confirms the fact that praising appropriate behavior and ignoring disruptive behavior can be an effective means of developing a desirable classroom atmosphere. Hunter (1967) and Thomas, et al. (1968) caution that the positive reinforcer must follow immediately to result in positive reinforcement and increase the frequency of the desired behavior. Becker (1967) refers to verbal praise as being a "powerful principle for influencing the development of social behavior." (p. 287)

Research has also shown that teachers can be taught to implement systematic procedures to increase appropriate behavior of students. Becker, et al. (1967) conducted teacher training seminars and the teachers became so effective that nearly all of the children in the study showed less deviant behavior. The Becker study included teachers from diverse backgrounds and with various personalities. The Madsen, Becker, Thomas (1968) study reinforced the findings of the Becker et al. (1967) study. Both teacher and observer comments indicated dramatic changes in the atmosphere of the classrooms. Hall et al. (1968b) achieved success in training first year teachers to apply the systematic reinforcement procedures.

These findings support the following generalizations:

G5: Inappropriate classroom behavior can best be controlled by ignoring rather than punishing.

G6: Verbal praise reinforces appropriate behavior.

Extrinsic Rewards vs. Intrinsic Motivation

Although at first glance the use of verbal rewards to modify behavior appears to be a panacea for controlling an undisciplined classroom, research has introduced a controversial aspect of praising student behavior. According to Good and Brophy (1978) psychologists traditionally "have always stressed the importance of reinforcement as basic to providing both motivation and guidance to the learner." (p. 180) These writers contend that although praise is considered to be a form of reinforcement, it is actually inadvisable and cite other theorists (Montessori, 1964; Moore & Anderson, 1969; Piaget, 1952) who concur. Rather than using praise to reinforce positive student behavior, Good and Brophy believe a teacher should "build upon intrinsic motivation for learning, without attempting to supplement it through extrinsic reinforcement, including praise." (p. 180)

According to Deci and Benware (1974), students are intrinsically motivated when they engage in behavior because the behavior itself is rewarding. On the other hand, they are extrinsically motivated when they perform the behavior in order to receive an external reward. An external reward, according to Locke (1968) is an event or object which is external to the student and which motivates him/her to act.

Researchers (e.g. Deci & Benware, 1974; Green & Lepper, 1974; Staw, 1976) have discovered that adding extrinsic reinforcement to an already interesting task does not increase intrinsic motivation, but may instead cause a student to lose interest in

the activity or as Green and Lepper put it "turn play into work." (p. 49) This concept suggests the following generalization:

G7: Extrinsic rewards lessen intrinsic motivation.

This has importance for the educator because most of a person's learning activity actually occurs outside the organized and reinforced setting of the classroom (Staw, 1976).

Praise vs. Intrinsic Motivation

In regard to this concept some authorities do not believe that verbal praise constitutes an extrinsic reward or that even if it does, it is not detrimental to the student's intrinsic motivation. According to Maehr(1976) two studies by Kruglanski (1975a, 1975b) show that verbal praise does not necessarily function as an extrinsic reward that reduces intrinsic motivation. Several authorities (e.g. Rowe, 1974; Maehr, 1976; Fish, 1978-1979; Bates, 1979; Deci et al., 1980) believe that if praise acts as informational feedback it will not inhibit intrinsic motivation.

Although Deci et al. (1980) strongly opposes rewards, including praise, as a controlling device to manipulate student behavior, he agrees with the idea that if praise is a source of informational feedback about competency, it does not have an adverse effect. Instead, it can encourage self-responsibility, greater internal motivation, and better self-concept. Praise such as "I really appreciated that, because..." and "How did you get those beautiful colors in your picture's sky?" (Gordon, 1974) invites a response from the child and includes some information about his/her competency. Using feedback to describe the specific and

the particular behavior or accomplishment keeps the praise from being vague, too general to be helpful, or incongruent.

Although the authorities differ in some areas, they appear to be in agreement with the following generalization:

G8: Praise is effective and not detrimental to students' intrinsic motivation when it is used as informational feedback.

S U M M A R Y

This study has serious implications for the classroom teacher. Although verbal praise has been proven to be an effective communication tool for establishing desired classroom behavior and for improving performance academically, it can be used unwisely by the school teachers if they are not cognizant of some of the research reported in this paper. The understanding, sensitive, and knowledgeable teacher must be responsible in administering verbal praise so that it will best serve the interests of the students' individual needs and thereby encourage more enjoyable involvement in the learning process.

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